Active Learning Teaching Fellow Application: Answers to Questions

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1. Please describe your past experiences using active learning methods in the classroom. Include lessons learned and/or successes experienced.

I regularly (once or twice a semester) teach EWCAT sections of my Death & Dying (PHIL 4371) and Introduction to Philosophy (PHIL 1301) courses. These involve weekly or bi-weekly peer-led discussion sessions, where the class is split into smaller groups of 12-15 students each. These sessions provide students with the opportunity to take greater ownership of their learning in the course; and they provide the peer leaders with the opportunity to hone their skills as classroom leaders and develop their abilities as budding teachers. I have mentored several other Philosophy faculty in developing EWCAT sections of their own courses, and I helped to design and write the proposal for the Applied Ethics and Critical Thinking minor in CHSS, which centers on EWCAT courses in various disciplines.

I have routinely revised my approach to these peer-led sessions, modifying them as need be depending on the course and particular students enrolled in that section. One issue I faced early on was an uneven distribution of speakers and personalities in the discussion groups. In response, I stopped randomly assigning students to the groups and used my experience with them during the first couple weeks of the semester to try and form groups I felt would more effectively engage with each other. This has greatly improved the experience for my students and peer leaders.

This semester I have incorporated project-based learning into the EWCAT structure for my Death & Dying course. Students meet every Friday in smaller groups with a peer leader and have been engaged in the project of identifying a topic they would like to invite a speaker to come to the final week of class and talk about. So far, it seems to be going great and I am excited to see how this addition to the EWCAT model pans out. I plan on revisiting the idea once I receive student feedback (they will write a reflection paper at the end of the term) and attend the speaker visits.

Two years ago, I redesigned my Contemporary Moral Issues (PHIL 2306) course to include several active learning elements. After the first month, I split the class into three teams. We have three applied units, and the different teams rotate between different functions for each unit—one finds supplementary readings, which they present to the class in a speed-dating format I came up with; one engages in an in-class debate; and one writes a position paper. This course design has been very successful, and I am beginning to incorporate similar elements into my other courses—for example, I added a supplementary reading assignment to my Introduction to Philosophy course. This is a great way to diversify the syllabus and allow space for students to become authoritative instructors for their peers in a low-stakes, engaging context.
I continually revise the particular elements of my Contemporary Moral Issues course in response to student feedback. For example, students in the first iteration of the course helped me to see that I should weight the grades for all three assignments the same. I had originally made the paper worth more than the debate and supplementary readings, but then the first group to write the paper had the disadvantage of less instructor feedback prior to turning in their biggest assignment.

Finally, I incorporate low-stakes, in-class writing assignments in conjunction with small group work in all of my courses. And I hold essay workshops, centered on peer-to-peer activities, in my classes prior to essay due dates. These workshops have evolved over the years in response to student feedback and my own evaluation of what works and what does not. But I routinely hear from students that they are enormously helpful. Perhaps the two biggest lessons I have learned in running these workshops are, first, that it is important to have clear, detailed assignment rubrics posted well ahead of time and, second, that students need explicit instruction on how to write for the discipline of philosophy. I’m looking for different things in their papers than their English or Biology professors. Students are required to come to the essay workshop with an outline of their paper. And I have geared several of the activities in the workshop towards meeting the goal of clarifying the assignment and providing opportunities to receive peer and instructor feedback on drafted sections of the paper (e.g., introduction and conclusion paragraphs). Students leave with an improved outline and the start of a draft of their final essay.

2. Over the next two years, what plans do you have for incorporating more active learning into your classes? How do you expect this fellowship to help with these plans?

My main goal for the next two years is to become more familiar with evidence-based best practices for incorporating active learning in the classroom. This will allow me to (a) increase the number of active learning techniques in my toolkit and (b) improve active learning techniques I already employ in the classroom.

One concrete goal is to redesign my Introduction to Philosophy, Death & Dying, and Philosophy of Crime & Justice (PHIL 4380) courses along the lines of how I redesigned my Contemporary Moral Issues course a couple of years ago. But due to differences in subject matter, I will need to do different things in each of these courses. Hence the need to increase the number of tools in my kit.

A second goal is to better develop active learning techniques I currently use, such as the peer-led discussion sessions in my EWCAT courses and the supplementary reading assignment in, especially, my Contemporary Moral Issues course. But I want to make sure that my use of these techniques adheres to best practices. Hence the need for a better grip on the literature.

A third goal is to begin writing about my use of these techniques for publication. The supplementary reading assignment, where students present their readings in a method modeled on speed dating, is a technique I developed on my own. I think it
works great (and students agree!). I would like to publish something on this in the future, but I need more than just my anecdotal experience to base an article on.

I expect that this fellowship would help me in achieving these goals in three main ways. First, it would provide me with the time to devote to course redesign and pedagogical research. Second, it would provide me with a plethora of resources. I would have my colleagues to mine for their experiences in the classroom, and I would have a growing list of references from the literature in the Active Learning Library. Third, my colleagues would be a great resource to brainstorm (and perhaps role-play) ways to improve my use of these techniques in response to student feedback.

3. What plans do you have for assessing the success of the plans you described above?

I plan to assess the success of my plans in three main ways. First, I will continue to use my student course evaluations, including both the quantitative scores and the qualitative comments, to gauge what has and hasn’t worked. Second, I would like to develop supplementary questions to include on my IDEA evaluations in order to better assess specific techniques I utilize in particular courses. Frankly, this is something I could use some guidance on, and I expect this fellowship would be very helpful in this regard. Third, I would like to utilize the SACS data for my courses collected by the Philosophy Program to evaluate the success of the active learning techniques I incorporate in them. We are in the process of updating our SACS instruments, and there is a real opportunity here. For example, in the meeting of the committee to assess our SACS instrument for PHIL 2306, I proposed figuring out a way to incorporate a writing sample as part of what we use to assess whether we are achieving our pedagogical goals. Almost every section we teach is writing enhanced, and yet our SACS tools are multiple-choice tests. Revising our instrument to look at student improvement in writing would allow me to assess the effectiveness of my essay workshops. It would also serve the broader goal of allowing the Philosophy Program to demonstrate that it is, in fact, helping students to become better writers.

4. What plans do you have for disseminating the progress you’ve made on these plans?

I have already mentioned my plan to try and publish on active learning techniques I have developed on my own. And I have mentioned my role as a mentor for other faculty. These are two means of disseminating what I’ve learned. A third would be to present at conferences. In addition to professional conferences elsewhere, I would plan to present at the annual SHSU Teaching and Learning Conference. I would love to lead a session, for instance, on my speed dating-inspired supplementary reading assignment. This fellowship would prepare me to present, as it would allow me to better articulate what evidence-based best practices this technique relates to. And I would benefit from hearing others’ presentations, including faculty at other
institutions. I would be able to use my Departmental travel funds (perhaps also the funds that would come with this fellowship?) to fund the necessary travel.